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ABSTRACT

This study examines the hypothesis that in early adulthood each sex represses opposite-sex characteristics in order to provide optimum conditions for care of the young. Sex roles become less distinct in the second half of life, when parenting is completed. The study draws on longitudinal data from the Oakland Growth Study at Berkeley, which explored personality changes in the same men and women over time. It began in 1932 with over 200 boys and girls who were then entering junior high school. They were observed repeatedly during junior and senior high school and interviewed again in-depth at ages 40 and 50. A total of 40 men and 40 women remained in the study over all four age periods, and data was drawn from these 80 subjects. One study concludes that the tasks of young adulthood, such as parenting and career building, tend to polarize sex roles. To perform these external roles efficiently, individuals tend to polarize their internal roles. But as the individual approaches middle life, changes in life tasks and time perspective shake up old patterns and allow new ones to take form. (Author)

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Coming Together in the Middle Years: A Longitudinal Study of

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
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Sex Role Convergence *

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There is a story reported by the psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, about an Indian warrior-chief "To whom in middle age the Great Spirit appeared in a dream. The spirit announced to him that from then on he must sit among the women and children, wear women's clothes, and eat the food of women. He obeyed the dream without suffering a loss of prestige." (1933, p. 107). Jung comments that this vision is a true expression of a psychic revolution in the middle years of life: "[The man] discovers his tender feelings and [the woman] her sharpness of mind." (p. 108).

A growing body of empirical evidence supports this view. David Gutmann (in press), in his cross-cultural studies, documents what he terms "the normal unisex of later life." Gutmann proposes that, in early adulthood, each sex represses opposite-sex characteristics in order to provide optimum conditions for care of the young. He suggests that sex roles become less distinct when parenting is completed in the second half of life.

Studies in our own society also suggest that men and women converge roles, to a degree, as they age. To name a few: Neugarten and Gutmann (1968), in their TAT analysis of family relations, find that older women become more accepting of aggressive impulses and older men of nurturant impulses. Chiriboga and Thurnher (1975) report that 60-year-old women view themselves as more assertive and effective than women at 50. Saarni (1976) finds that middle-aged men are less power-oriented than young men and middle-aged women less family-oriented than young women.

The Study

Most of these studies rely on cross-sectional age comparisons. The present

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study draws on longitudinal data from the Oakland Growth Study at the Institute of Human Development, U.C., Berkeley, to explore personality changes in the same women and men over time.

The Oakland Growth Study began in 1932 with over 200 boys and girls entering junior high school. They were observed repeatedly during their junior and senior high school years and interviewed again in-depth at ages 40 and 50. Forty men and forty women remained in the study over all four age periods. These are the subjects of my study. Born in 1921, they are a white, urban, middle-class group, predominantly Protestant and conservative in their values.¹

The California Q Sort (Block, 1961; Block in collaboration with Haan, 1971) was used to rate respondents' personalities at each of the four age periods: early and late adolescence, ages 40 and 50.² The Q sorts yielded ^ameasure of personality change over time and an index of overall psychological health

¹Most Oakland Growth Study members married and have children. Average family size is between two and three children. All but one man and four-fifths of the women are currently married. The rest are widowed or divorced. One-third of the group divorced at some time in their lives. Most of the women are family-centered, though about half work at least part time. Occupations of the men and women's spouses range from minor managerial to higher executive and professional levels. Men are at a slightly higher occupational level than women's spouses.

²The 100-item California Q Sort requires raters to distribute items into nine categories, ranging from most to least characteristic for each respondent. Q sorts were based on extensive observations of respondents in early and late adolescence and interview transcripts at ages 40 and 50. Each person was Q-sorted independently by at least two judges. Judges had no access to data from more than one age period. Mean interjudge reliabilities (computed by the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula) range from .73 to .75.

(Livson and Peskin, 1967).³ Using the mean psychological health score for each sex as the cutting point, I separated men and women at age 50 into four groups: 21 healthy men and 24 healthy women: 19 unhealthy men and 16 unhealthy women. Change in degree of similarity between men and women over time was then examined for the group as a whole and, separately, for healthy and unhealthy men and women.

Similarity between the sexes was defined as the correlation between the average man and the average woman on a common set of 90 Q-sort items at each age period. A clear trend emerged. In early adolescence, the two sexes are moderately alike (.77), become much less so in late adolescence (.65), then increase their resemblance through age 40 (.73) up to age 50 when they are most alike (.85).

Similarity between the sexes over time was next examined separately for individuals judged to be healthy/^{or unhealthy} by age 50. Unhealthy women and men show no change in their resemblance from late adolescence to age 50. But healthy women and men show a dramatic rise in similarity by 50--even more than the total group. (Early adolescence: .73; late adolescence: .56; age 40: .78; age 50: .91).

In what specific ways do healthy men and women become more alike? Do they follow different paths to psychological health by age 50? I will approach this question by identifying changes over time in characteristics that differentiate between the sexes at one or more age periods.⁴ I will begin by comparing changes in healthy men and women and then contrast these with changes in unhealthy men and women.

³The index of psychological health was the correlation between each person's Q sort and an "ideal" sort of a psychologically healthy person, representing a composite of sorts by four clinical psychologists. The reliability of the composite sort is .95, reflecting an average first-order interjudge agreement of .82. The psychological health sort stresses qualities such as responsible, productive, warm, insightful, and relatively free of neurotic signs.

⁴Minimum significance levels used to identify differences between the sexes and changes over time (differences between age periods) were $\leq .10$.

Healthy Men and Women

Healthy men in this sample are the highest achievers of all groups. Their occupations, by age 50, are at the high executive and major professional levels and their educational level is higher than the other groups. (There are no other significant demographic differences among groups.) These men in early adulthood value rationality and use their intellectual skills to cope with the world. I will label this group "rational" men. They change relatively little from adolescence to age 40.⁵ As teenagers, they are more ambitious and intellectual than girls and their intellectuality is sharper and more analytic--qualities that remain higher in this group to age 50. Their adolescent personalities prepare them for adult male achievement roles. Changes that do occur by 40 continue along the lines apparent by adolescence. They become more assertive, less expressive of feelings, less openly dependent and continue to be more ambitious and power-oriented than women and to value intellect. However, their intellectuality seems more rigid than earlier: Their interests narrow; their originality declines. They seem to pay a price at this age for what appears to be a rather one-sided emphasis on traditional masculinity.

By age 50, this one-sidedness disappears. The cool, competitive orientation apparent at 40 is now balanced by a rise in nurturant, expressive qualities: They become more giving, protective, open to feelings, less aloof. While their ambition and power orientation remain high, their drive is now softened by more feminine qualities.

⁵ When the total number of characteristics that increase or decrease significantly from late adolescence to age 40 are compared, healthy men show less than half as many changes as healthy women ($p < .01$).

Healthy women in early adulthood are expressive, open, nurturant women with wide interests and rapid tempo. I will label them "active-feminine". They are more people-oriented than healthy men in adolescence and throughout adulthood. In their early teens they were more assertive than boys, but by late adolescence they exchange self-assertion for flirtatious, seductive behavior. As numerous researchers have shown, sex roles polarize during the adolescent years (Rosenberg and Simmons, 1973; Douvan and Adelson, 1966). By age 40, active-feminine women decline in courting behavior and rise in warmth, nurturance, and expressiveness--qualities suited to wife and mother roles. Not surprisingly, they become less assertive by 40 and handle stress by turning resentment inward. Guilt feelings and psychosomatic complaints increase. Active-feminine women, however, also become more ambitious and interested in ideas by 40, and their interests widen.

By 50 this trend accelerates. Healthy women rise to the level of men in creativity and philosophical interests. They become more analytic, assertive and skeptical. With this shift toward active mastery, intropunitive tendencies decline. While healthy women continue to be nurturant and open to feelings by 50, they now allow more masculine qualities to emerge. Both sexes in the healthy group become more androgynous by 50.

Unhealthy Men and Women

Unhealthy women and men, like the healthy, conform to traditional sex roles in early adulthood, but fail to develop as many socially desirable aspects of these roles. Unhealthy men at 40 are productive men with a strong sense of autonomy and pride in objectivity. However, they tend to be condescending, irritable, and extrapunitive. I have labelled this group "armored."

In their teens, they express their masculinity through rebelliousness, hostility, and impulsive behavior. Like healthy men, they are ambitious teenagers but seem to lack the self-discipline to implement their goals. They tend to be self-defeating and self-concerned.

By age 40, however, they modify their aggression in the service of instrumental productivity. They are now "doers." / But, as noted, their manner is condescending and extrapunitive. Their masculinity seems to take on an exaggerated, forced quality at the cost of spontaneity and increased stress. Less expressive and humorous than before, they are now more anxious and irritable.

By age 50, this trend reverses. Armored men cast off their armor. They become more openly dependent and more expressive of feeling: less aloof and anxious, more humorous, and less extrapunitive. They continue to be productive and ambitious but are less rigid in their pursuit of these goals. Both unhealthy and healthy men become more androgynous by 50, but different feminine qualities surface in each group: dependency in unhealthy men, nurturance in the healthy.

Unhealthy women in early adulthood are dependent, unassertive women, who arouse nurturance in others. They are protective, but their protectiveness has a fearful quality. I have called this group "passive-feminine." As teenagers, they were gregarious, conforming girls, sensitive to slights, seeking attention and reassurance through talkativeness and histrionic behavior. By age 40, like healthy women, they shift their behavior from courting to protective roles. But unlike healthy women, they become more openly dependent than before, less gregarious and talkative, and more fearful, self-defeating, and submissive. These women conform to traditional feminine sex roles in

early adulthood, but seem locked into socially undesirable aspects of these roles: dependency, timidity, compliance. Unlike healthy women, they do not widen their interests by 40.

Nor do passive women become more androgynous by 50 as do active women. Rather, they continue to develop in a feminine direction but now add qualities that validate their femininity: they appear more attractive, are more satisfied with their appearance, and become more talkative and dramatizing as in adolescence. At the same time, however, they continue to be fearful and dependent. Unhealthy women are the only group who do not develop opposite-sex characteristics by 50. And, of all groups, they are most anxious at 50.

Discussion

Both sexes in early adulthood suppress opposite-sex characteristics to conform with traditional sex roles: achievement for men, parenting for women. With the exception of passive women, both men and women in this study become more androgynous by the age of 50. But, to paraphrase Gutmann, neither sex quite achieves unisex in middle life. Each holds to same-sex characteristics as their dominant mode.

It would be misleading, however, to conceive of sex role convergence in unidimensional terms. Healthy women and men differ from the unhealthy in the kinds of feminine or masculine characteristics they choose--and in the way they move toward or away from androgyny.

Active and passive women in this study fall at opposite extremes in their conformity to sex roles throughout the adult years. Women who take on the active aspects of the feminine role--who are actively maternal, expressive, and energetic--are least rigidly bound, of all groups to traditional sex roles throughout their adult lives. They are the only group to move toward

opposite-sex characteristics prior to age 40. They combine nurturance as wives and mothers with intellectual growth as individuals--and continue to move in both directions by 50 when children are leaving home. Active women partake more and more fully of both sex roles as they progress through adulthood to middle age.

Women who take on more passive aspects of the feminine role--who are dependent and compliant--are most rigidly bound, of all groups, to traditional sex roles throughout their adult lives. They are relatively depressed during their mothering years and are the only group who do not adopt opposite-sex characteristics by age 50. Of all groups, they are most anxious at 50.

Men fall midway between these two types of women. Both healthy and unhealthy men conform rather strictly to traditional male roles in early adulthood--both are geared to action and competence--but both become more balanced by 50 when career issues become resolved or less salient. Both groups of men suppress spontaneity and tender feelings in their early adult years and stress productivity and dominance in the service of ambition. But this pressure seems to ease off in the middle years. By age 50, their tough, competitive posture is softened by more feminine, expressive qualities. However, different feminine qualities rise to the surface in each group: nurturance in healthy men, dependency in the unhealthy.

I would suggest that sex roles in early adulthood are more rigid for men than for women. Men (at least of this generation and social class) are under greater pressure to suppress passive, dependent strivings during their career-building years. Women, on the other hand, can be passive or active while fulfilling family roles. But when more passive, compliant aspects of feminine sex roles predominate, they may lock women into a relatively immature level of

ego functioning which, of all sex-linked characteristics, is most difficult to shed. Unlike men who are able to move beyond traditional sex role behavior in middle life, passive women seem to lack the resources to develop active, assertive skills as they age. Under less pressure to develop their active sides in early adulthood, they are apt to remain passive in middle age at the cost of anxiety and low self-esteem. It is socialization to this aspect of women's roles that has received so much attention from the feminist movement--and, as this study suggests, rightly so.

To conclude: The tasks of young adulthood--parenting, career-building--tend to polarize sex roles. To perform these external roles efficiently, individuals tend to polarize their internal roles. But as the individual approaches middle life, changes in life tasks and time perspective shake up old patterns and allow new ones to take form. The individual may now give herself (or himself) permission to change her self-image and live out unused parts of herself.

Men and women who have developed active modes of coping in early adulthood--who stress competence and are "doers", whether in traditional male or female roles--allow opposite-sex characteristics to emerge in their middle years. But women who have relied on passive modes of coping in early adulthood--who have conformed to dependent aspects of the feminine role--do not. These women continue to be dependent in their middle years and fail to develop opposite-sex characteristics.

This study suggests that the interplay between sex roles and behavior is a complex one. The individual's mode of coping, rather than her sex role per se, seems crucial. Traditional roles for women, unlike those for men, permit--but do not require--the individual to remain at a relatively dependent level of ego functioning. Conformity to dependent aspects of the feminine role inhibits further differentiation in middle life and exacts a price in high anxiety.

Whether the men and women in this group will become more androgynous in later years is a longitudinal question that awaits a longitudinal answer. But perhaps, as social norms change, the current generation of young people will select more flexibly from available sex roles prior to their middle age. In any case, middle age can open the door to a synthesis of opposites--a blending of his and hers.

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